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Dido and Musical Word Painting in Purcell's Opera *Dido and Aeneas* (1680): A Storm of Emotions

By: Hannah Forton

Valparaiso University Symposium on
Undergraduate Research and Creative Expression (SOURCE)
May 1, 2020

Research Question

How does Purcell employ musical word painting in order to express Dido's emotional states in Act 1?

Methods

- 1) Historical / contextual
- 2) Music-analytical

Definitions

- Word painting:

“The use of musical gesture(s) in a work with an actual or implied text to reflect, often pictorially, the literal or figurative meaning of a word or phrase. A common example is a falling line [...] for 'He came down from heaven' [...].”

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Figurative Word Painting of Dido

Words of Affection

No. 2

- ⬡ “I am pressed with” [weighed down by] (m. 7, 14, 23, 30)
- ⬡ “Torment” (m. 8, 15, 24, 31)
- ⬡ “Languish” (m. 45 ff., 49 ff., 53)
- ⬡ “Grief” (47, 54)

No. 5

- ⬡ “Storm” (m. 2, 16) Exception
- ⬡ “Fierce” (m. 8)
- ⬡ “Stubborn” (m. 13)
- ⬡ “Pity” (m. 24)

Analysis 1: “I am pressed with” Act 1, No. 2 m. 7

Word painting: “I am pressed with”

Music-notation: Sixteenth-note following a dotted eighth

Effect: Agitation in Dido’s voice

5

Dido
Soprano

I - am prest__ [with]

Piano

Analysis 1: “I am pressed with” Act 1, No. 2 m. 14

Word painting: “I am pressed with”

Music-notation: Eighth-note figure including descending semitone

Effect: Melancholy, similar to “sighing figure” (descending semitone)

Dido
Soprano

I - am prest____with

Piano

Slide 9

Analysis 2: “Torment”

Act 1, No. 2 m. 15

Word painting: “Torment”

Music-notation: Perfect fifth interval. Sixteenth-note followed by dotted eighth.

Effect: Agitation (snappy rhythm) and sadness (descending semitone)

Dido
Soprano

tor_____ment

Piano

Analysis 3: “Languish”

Act 1, No. 2 m. 45

Word painting: “Languish”

Music-notation: Pitches are B flat-A-G-F sharp-G. Melisma on “lan.” Crunchy, dissonant chord with the A-natural and F-sharp.

Effect: Weakening, deteriorating, and unsteady

The image shows a musical score for the song "Languish" from Act 1, No. 2, m. 45. The score is written for Soprano and Piano. The Soprano part is in treble clef, 3/4 time, with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The melody consists of the notes B-flat, A, G, F-sharp, and G, with a melisma on the word "lan." The Piano part is in treble and bass clefs, 3/4 time, with a key signature of two flats. The piano accompaniment features a dissonant chord with A-natural and F-sharp, and a crunchy, deteriorating texture.

Dido
Soprano

lan _____ guish

Piano

Analysis 3: “Languish”

Act 1, No. 2 m. 49

Word painting: “Languish”

Music-notation: Very melismatic. 11 beats long. More resolution due to root position g-minor.

Effect: Unstableness

Dido
Soprano

lan _____ guish, I

Piano

Analysis 4: “Grief”

Act 1, No. 2 m. 47

Word painting: “Grief”

Music-notation: Descending semitone C - B flat

Effect: Melancholy (sighing figure)

47

Dido
Soprano

till my grief is known, I

Piano

Slide 13

Analysis 4: “Grief”

Act 1, No. 2 m. 54

Word painting: “Grief”

Music-notation: Sixteenth note followed by two dotted eighth notes.

Effect: Nervous and distress (snappy rhythm)

54

Dido
Soprano

till my grief__ is known, Yet

Piano



Analysis 5: “Storm”

Act 1, No. 5 m. 2

Word painting: “Storm”

Music-notation: Melismatic. Quick sixteenth notes ascending. Travels a whole octave C4 to C5.

Effect: Stormy

The image displays a musical score for Act 1, No. 5, m. 2. The score is written for Soprano and Piano. The Soprano part is in 4/4 time, starting with a forte (f) dynamic. The lyrics are: "Whence could so much vir-tue spring? What storms, _____ what bat-tles did he sing?". The Piano part is in 4/4 time, starting with a piano (p) dynamic. The piano part features a melismatic passage of quick sixteenth notes ascending, which is highlighted by an orange box. The piano part also includes a forte (f) dynamic marking.

Analysis 5: “Storm”

Act 1, No. 5 m. 16

Word painting: “Storm”

Music-notation: Melismatic. Range of pitches is small. Highest note G, lowest is D. Notes follow neighbor notes. One minor third leap.

Effect: Stormy and agitated emotions.

Dido
Soprano

f

Mine with storms, _____ of care op-prest

Piano

Analysis 6: “Fierce”

Act 1, No. 5 m. 8

Word painting: “Fierce”

Music notation: Quick sixteenth notes ascending a whole octave. Perfect fourth interval to start.

Effect: Strong, aggressive, and intense

The musical score for measure 8 of Act 1, No. 5, features a Soprano part and a Piano accompaniment. The Soprano part, labeled "Dido Soprano", begins with a measure rest marked with the number 8. The lyrics "fierce, _____ how fierce in" are written below the staff. The Piano part, labeled "Piano", consists of two staves. The right hand starts with a forte (*f*) dynamic and plays a series of chords and single notes, including a perfect fourth interval. The left hand plays a descending line of notes. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is common time (C).

Analysis 7: “Stubborn”

Act 1, No. 5 m. 13

Word painting: “Stubborn”

Music notation: Only two notes, B flat and E flat. Sixteenth note and dotted eighth. Descending leap.

Effect: Firm and grounded

13

Dido
Soprano

stub-born heart un- mov' d could

Piano

The image shows a musical score for a scene from Act 1, No. 5, measure 13. The Soprano part, labeled 'Dido', has a melody consisting of a descending leap from B-flat to E-flat, with lyrics 'stub-born heart un- mov' d could'. The Piano accompaniment consists of a single chord (B-flat major) in the right hand and a single note (B-flat) in the left hand, both sustained throughout the measure.

Summary and Conclusion

- Better understand Dido's emotional state
- Unique interpretation
- Influence of storm metaphor
- Emphasizes the emotions